

The Sacred Marriage and the Warrior Queens

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Summary: Two Viking children, their Bravest Warrior and the Boy Who Spoke with Dragons. One betrothed to an Archer Queen, ending centuries of bloody conflict, the other chosen by their most beloved god. (RotG/Brave cross., a collection of Jack/Hiccup and Astrid/Merida stories)

1. Dragon Among Bears

Title: The Dragon Among Bears

Rating: T

Summary: When Stoic the Vast appears on the shores of DunBroch and requests his eldest to be considered as a suitor for the Princess' hand no one, least of all Merida, expects the blonde girl who steps up to the target.

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><p>"But they're Vikings. They're not allowed to present a suitor!"<p>

"And she's a woman! She can't marry the princess."

"She didn't even use a bow. The rules clearly stated it was to be a challenge of archery. She just lobbed a bloody great axe at the target!"

"Which was a much better shot than any of their sons could manage, if ye ask me," Merida whispers to her father the moment the head of clan Macintosh was done yelling. Fergus just chuckles in agreement, an action that quickly earns him a slap from his wife.

The clan patriarchs were in an uproar, filling the throne room with enough noise that it was a mystery how anyone could actually be heard. Today had been the day of the challenge to determine which suitor would be wed to Merida when, before the festival could even begin, a dragon headed longboat had pulled up to port. Fearing an attack, Fergus had rushed down prepared for battle only to be met with a peace offering, a stone plague carved with the Dunbroch family crest and a light wooden shield banded with burnished steel. An impressive gift, Merida knew from her studies, as the shield was the most important part of Viking arms. And they were Vikings, she could tell easily from the design of their ship.

Their age old enemies.

But not today, it seemed, as the head of their tribe, a man by the name of Stoic the Vast who was, somehow, even larger and more burly than her father though just as ginger, offered them a peace treaty. They would swear an oath not to raid any territory controlled by the Dunbroch line in exchange for being able to present his eldest child as a suitor for the princess.

Great, Merida had thought as she spied a mousy brown haired boy standing shyly behind the Viking chief. He was barely the size of Stoic's leg. I'd rather marry the Dingwall boy.

Much to Merida's horror, at that of the other leaders she would soon find out, after a small bout of deliberation the proposition was accepted by the Queen and preparations for the festival were back on their way with the addition of a fourth target at the archery range.

"Oh wee lamb, better not give him a longbow, it'll knock him right over," she remembers saying snidely as she and her father took their places in on the raised platform to overlook the contest.

"Bet he's wishing he was back on his boat," Fergus had responded, in a low enough tone her mother, who had been at the front of the platform to announce the start, didn't hear. The Viking boy certainly looked too delicate and small even hold a weapon, let alone use one, so she hadn't been too worried about him winning the contest.

So it had been to everyone's surprise when a blonde girl had strode forward, announced herself to be the heir of clan Haddock, and took her place next to the wee Dingwall lad at the far right of the line. Perhaps it was the deadly look in her blue eyes or the wicked double sided axe strapped to her back, but no one had even thought to question her eligibility. All Merida knew was that the shock of her presentation had been enough to make her forget her own plan of entering as the first born of clan Dunbroch and winning her own hand.

As far as Fergus was concerned the winner was clear as the last target wasn't even standing now, laying on the grass and cut cleanly in two. However, Elinor found that she had to side with the other clans as the Viking girl had technically cheated by not using a bow. She had, in one fluid movement that had certainly impressed the crowd, whisked the axe from her back and had thrown it, dead centre, at the target.

At least Stoic and his group have enough brains to stay out of the throne room while chaos reigned, they were camped down on the shore. Fergus had given them permission to hunt in the forest for their dinner when the invitation to join them in the Great Hall had been politely declined. From her seat, Merida could see their large campfire and what looked like a deer cooking.

"I demand you redo the contest and insist that she participate properly."

"What do you mean 'participate properly'? She's a girl! She's can't be a suitor when she's a girl!"

"Mam," Merida says quietly, so quietly that only her mother's sharp ears pick it up.

"What is it, Merida?" Elinor asks and Merida's almost stung by how guarded her voice is. They had already fought about this betrothal and she didn't want a repeat in front of their guests.

"A marriage alliance would be really good for us, wouldn't it. More solid than just a peace treaty. We'd have an actual alliance, wouldn't we, with trade and help in times of war and it would last," the princess says, making up her mind as quickly as she could analyze the situation. "That's the best choice for the kingdom, isn't it? That's why you're not giving them an actual answer right now, because you want to agree with Dad."

"Yes," Elinor says, just as softy. "Now you're thinking like a princess."

"I want to talk to her before I make my decision." She's not asking for permission to do so, isn't even considering that this isn't her choice to make, and her mother looks ready to tell her so. "I'm not going to marry someone when I don't even know their name, Mam."

"Alright, go now and I'll try to pacify the lords while you're gone." Merida hugs her fiercely and runs, much to her mother's disapproval, from the hall. The noise in the hall grows in response to her actions and she can just hear the beginnings of one of her mother's speeches as the door closes behind her. She has no idea how her mother's going to be able to quell the outrage but she's never failed at it before.

It's in the late afternoon sun that she makes her way down to the shore, boisterous laughter and the smell of roasting meat leading her on the path.

"Princess!" Stoic calls as she slides down the last ridge before their camp. He's brandishing what looks like a whole wild turkey on a roasting spit and has a leg of something else in his other hand. She has to smile at how alike he and her father are. "I suspect a decision has been reached."

"Sort of," Merida responds and she gets a confused head tilt back. "I wish to speak with your daughter first."

"Aye, you'll find her up on that hill," he gestures over to a ridge just before the tree line and Merida thanks him before starting up.

When she gets to the top she doesn't quite expect to find the girl practicing with a bow. There are several arrows littering the ground but a majority are stuck firmly in and around a shield she'd hung on a tree. A decent shot but it could be improved.

Merida must have stepped on a branch and startled her because the next thing she knows the bow is pointing at her and their eyes lock. "Oh, Princess, I'm sorry."

"If you knew how to use a bow, why didn't you shoot in the contest?"

"Because I didn't know then," she states simply as she turns back to her makeshift target and lets the arrow fly. It thuds near the bottom of the shield. She leans on the bow afterwards, it's larger than the bows Merida's used to and easily comes up to their shoulders. "With the way the other lords were looking at me I figured they'd want to hold a new contest tomorrow."

"You just taught yourself archery. In the last few hours. That's impossible."

"No it's not," snaps another voice from behind the girl, a boy Merida hadn't even noticed until he'd spoken who's holding an almost empty quiver of arrows. He's brown haired but not the same boy that Merida had assumed to be Stoic's son, he's stockier and has the bulging muscles that she expects from the Vikings. "Astrid can do anything she wants."

"So you're name's Astrid."

"I probably should have started with that," she says as she holds out her hand in greeting. "It's nice to finally meet you Princess."

"Merida," she insists and it gets a smile from Astrid as they clasp forearms. Astrid's grip is firm and Merida notices that, even if she doesn't look it, she's got the same strength in her arms as any other Viking she's seen. "My mother has reached a decision about the betrothal."

That makes the blonde pause for a moment before she turns to the boy. "Leave us."

"What? But Astrid!"

"No, go find my brother or something. I'm sure he's doing something interesting."

"Hiccup?" The boy asks in disbelief and Merida can't help the chortle that escapes her at the name.

"What?" Astrid asks, hint of a smile around her mouth. "Our tribe believes that if you give your child a horrible name it'll scare off the trolls. His name is Snotlout," she says to another bout of chortling. "And he's leaving." The boy rolls his eyes but reluctantly gets up and heads back down to the camp. Astrid sits heavily in his place and gestures to the empty spot on the rock for Merida. "Stoic thinks that an alliance between our tribe and your kingdom could be beneficial to all of us."

"Yeah, me Mam thinks so... Wait, you just called your Dad by his name."

"He adopted me when I was ten, I never got used to calling him anything else."

"Oh, you and your brother are adopted, that's kind of him."

"Just me, I call Hiccup my brother because it bothers him since he used to have a crush on me when we were kids. What's wrong with that?"

"Then you're not the first born," Merida says slowly as she sits next to Astrid. "If you were adopted when you were ten then even if you're older you won't be considered the first born of Stoic's clan. The law states that only the first born heir of the clan can be presented as a suitor."

"I am the eldest and Hiccup isn't eligible to marry you. Or anyone else for that matter."

"Why?"

"Religious obligations." And perhaps she shouldn't pry into that but she's never been one for heeding caution.

"So he's some kind of monk then?"

"Not exactly." It's accompanied with an appraising look, as if she's sizing her up to be allowed the explanation. "We call it the Sacred Marriage. He's betrothed to our guardian, the Winter Spirit." She pauses to let that sink in before continuing. "It's not something we share with most outsiders, it tends to give them a target."

"I won't tell anyone, I promise."

"As far as your lords are concerned, I'm Stoic's daughter and I'd like to keep it that way. Besides, your parents let me compete, that should be enough validation for the others. Aren't they the king and queen?"

"The lords certainly aren't happy that you're a girl. They think it's inappropriate."

"And what about you?" When she doesn't answer right away Astrid continues. "Are you happy that I'm a girl?"

The question brings her up short and she considers it while looking into intense blue eyes. "I guess I never really thought about it before." With a frustrated sigh she breaks the contact and returns to her feet. "This is the life my Mam's been preparing me for, not the one I want. I never wanted to get married, I just want my freedom! I want to be able to do what I want to do and go wherever I want. I don't want to be tied down by some tradition."

"We tend to travel a lot, we're Vikings, it's kind of an occupational hazard," Astrid says and when she smiles to herself she looks almost sad. She looks out at the shore, at the setting sun, and stands herself. "You better make up your mind, they'll probably want an

answer today." She nods once before turning and starting to walk back to her camp and Merida watches the retreating figure for a moment before making her choice.

"Hey, you said your people travel a lot." Astrid turns when she catches up and Merida quickly continues. "Could I come? If I was there?"

"I thought you said you wanted your freedom."

"I do!"

"Then why are you asking me?" Astrid stops dead in the middle of the pathway and she leans on her bow again, it makes Merida think that serious is her default expression. "We both want our freedom, not to be tied down. You don't need my permission. If someone's going somewhere you want to go just get on the boat. It's not my place to stop you, no more than it's yours to tell me what to do. That's not our way."

"Well I don't fancy boats much myself, so I'm bringing my horse." And she watches Astrid's lips curl into a real smile when she recognises the joke.

"Oh, we've got something better than horses to ride but that's a secret for another time. Besides, who says I don't want to live here? It's so warm out and I'm enjoying it."

"This is warm? Where in the world do you live?"

"It's an island called Berk, sail north for three days and when it starts snowing you're there." Her tone is so flat it sets Merida off again, chortling so hard she began to snort. "It snows for nine months of the year and hails the other three but it's home. And there are things that make it worth it, of course."

"Of course. You know, it's going to be intimidating."

"What is?"

"Going back into the throne room and telling all the armed warriors that I'm not planning on marrying any of their sons." The smile Merida gives her is slightly shy, it's not the most traditional of proposals but Astrid gently nudges her with her elbow and smiles back.

"Yeah, well they'll have to get through me now, won't they?"

_ Now I'm not going to say it was love at first sight, not anything like that at all. I didn't love Astrid, at least not right away is all. It just started out as a political match. What we did do was quickly become friends. Mam didn't really approve of that part as it turned out that Astrid was exactly the kind of influence she was keen on me avoiding; Astrid was a warrior above everything else and no amount of my mother's disapproving tutting was going to change that. Oh and she always puts her weapons on the table, it's a Viking thing._

_ Things changed as we got older. Hiccup became the leader of their tribe, a spiritual leader instead of a military one. So not being

needed in Berk quite as often lead to Astrid living in Scotland all year round. We were the Warrior Queens of Dunbroch, feared across the land, we faced down countless invasions and slew the demon bear Mor'du. None of the clans rebelled though, despite my temper and Astrid's habit of punching those who bothered her._

_ We went where the wind led us, sometimes together and sometimes alone. I kept my freedom and gods help anyone who tries to contain her. And, yeah, somewhere along the road I did fall in love with Astrid. She's wild and fierce and everything I never knew I wanted._

_ Maybe I did change my fate after all._

2. The Bride-Groom's Ride

Title: The Bride-Groom's Ride

Rating: T

Summary: Merida reflects on her wedding in Berk.

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><p>Their wedding day is something she'll never forget.<p>

The Berk one, that's the one she thinks of most fondly. They had a ceremony in Dunbroch too but her mother had managed, somehow, to get Astrid into a tight red and gold dress so Merida didn't remember much of the day other than biting her lip to stop herself from laughing at Astrid's obvious displeasure.

The other miracle is how Merida convinced her not to burn it afterwards.

Both days are steeped in tradition, which is probably the reason Astrid allowed it. So Merida doesn't even think to complain when the minute she steps down in Berk she's whisked off and plunked into an herbal bath that makes her nose itch. The clothes this time around are far more to her taste, simple underclothes consisting of dark pants and a long sleeved shirt with a more elaborately stitched tunic overtop.

"Merida," her mother's gasp makes her turn from the mirror where she's entranced by her own reflection. But Elinor's expression is almost better, she looks like she's trying, trying so hard, to not look disapproving. Astrid had never been one to change out of her Viking clothes when she was in Dunbroch and Merida's only change tended to be a fondness for her lover's fur lined cloak. It was cold in Berk. So this was the first time she'd ever actually looked like one of them and she can understand that it's making her mother as uncomfortable as it's making her elated. "Are you sure that's what you're supposed to be wearing?"

"Mam! "

"Elinor, we've known Haddock for four years now, what were you expecting," Fergus reasons before walking to his daughter and grasping her by the shoulders. "Just look at you." And she's too old to squeal or jump around but she does so anyways. "I think you look beautiful."

"You always look beautiful," Elinor says as she takes her chance to hug her daughter. "Are you going to do anything with your hair?" And she frowns as she rolls her eyes.

"Not usually, we normally wear it loose for weddings," says a soft voice from the doorway and Merida leans around her mother to find Hiccup standing in the doorway. He's grown since she first met him and looks a bit more like a blacksmith now.

"Astrid never wears her hair loose," Merida says and there's a nervous flutter in her stomach at the smirk he gives her. "Never. I have never seen her with her hair down. She wears it braided to sleep."

"Well you're in for a surprise then, aren't you? Here, I brought you this." He holds up a small white flower and she lets him weave it into her hair. "March violets are--"

"Her favourite, I know." She crushes him into a hug.

"I'm glad that you're going to be my sister," he whispers to her and she smiles against his shoulder. Then, louder. "You don't hit me, quite as often." Which of course is just asking for her to punch him in the shoulder. Elinor bristles and she's expecting another round of the 'a princess doesnae' lecture but it's overridden by Fergus' sharp bark of laughter.

"Here you go lass," Fergus kisses her on the forehead and pulls a bow from beneath his cape to hand her.

"Fergus!"

"I'm supposed to have it Mam! Calm down." She traces her fingers over the bow, she made it herself and carved it with symbols important to both of them. She drapes it over her shoulder, fitting it snugly against her back, so she doesn't have to carry it.

"We'll go join the others." Her mother's hand sweeps down her cheek and her father squeezes her shoulder before they leave.

"Whenever you're ready, princess." And then she's alone.

She gives them a moment of head start, a moment to collect her thoughts. They were already married, this was just a formality, but she had been nervous in Dunbroch and was nervous here too. But that was normal, her mother had been nervous too. And just because she was nervous didn't mean she wasn't excited.

It's a short walk to the sky pier, the high outcropping cliff that was usually used as a takeoff space. Today it's full of people, witnesses for the ceremony. She catches sight of Astrid easily, standing at the highest point next to Stoick. She's in full armour, a studded leather skirt and a chest plate that gleams despite its battle worn scratches.

And her hair is down, catching in the wind and shining in the setting sun.

Suddenly nothing matters other than getting there as quickly as she can. Her mother won't approve but her leather and fur boots were made for running. She only slows when she's halfway up the hill and swaggers the rest. She takes her place opposite Astrid, so they're on either side of a sword plunged into the ground so it stands upright. Stoick calls everyone to order and asks them to exchange their weapons.

Merida pulls off her bow, thankful it doesn't get too caught in her hair, as Astrid takes a long dagger wrapped in dark leather from her belt. As Astrid looks at the bow, eyes lighting up at every detail, Merida pulls the dagger partly out of its sheath and runs her thumb over the flat of the blade. Feeling the hammer dents that indicate an inexperienced blacksmith. They didn't have to make them themselves but she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Thank you," the blonde whispers and pulls the bow over her head. Merida clasps the dagger to her heart before fastening it to her belt.

There's no instructions for their next step, not until Astrid places her palm against the sword's pommel and raises one eyebrow in challenge. Figure it out, that expression says, follow me. And they clasp hands over the hilt, holding tight. Stoick leads them through the vows. They swear oaths, to each other and to the land and the gods and, finally, to Jokul Frosti.

Then, over the cheering, Astrid leans in to whisper in her ear.

"Race me."

And she bolts.

It takes Merida a second, maybe two, to comprehend what's happened, doesn't even need Stoick's gentle push to get her started, before she's running down the hill as well. She focuses on that sheet of blonde hair as the Viking weaves her way through the village and catches up despite Astrid's head start. She begins to notice the marked path, the flags emblazoned with a bear and a nadder, and then the race really begins. They're both competitive, stubborn, and equally matched.

When she reaches the door, seconds ahead and no more, Merida puts her back to it, so when Astrid's momentum carries her, her hands hit the door on either side of her wife's head and inches separate them. They're both panting and winded and Astrid's fringe sticks to her flushed cheek. Merida throws her arms around Astrid's neck and pulls her the rest of the way. She threads her fingers through Astrid's hair as they kiss, who knows when she'll get another chance. It's not until she starts smirking against Astrid's lips that she pulls away.

"What?"

"I win." Astrid smiles, almost sheepishly, and when she nods their

noses brush. She drops her head to rest on Merida's shoulder and sighs heavily before asking her next question.

"And what exactly is so interesting about my hair?"

"I like it like this. It looks nice on you." And she can practically feel the blush where their skin is touching.

"But it's so impractical," she whines and Merida has to giggle. Astrid gently pulls away from her arms so she can lean on the doors beside her.

"I can smell the food. What are we waiting for?"

"Everyone else. Well, specifically Hiccup. We can't go in before he gets here."

"So at the feast tomorrow," she pauses to smirk while Astrid lets out a sharp bark of laughter, using one hand to stifle the noise and the other to punch Merida in the shoulder. "Anything I should know about? Like the happy married couple racing each other to the mead hall?"

"There's a tradition where the groom takes his sword and plunges it into the support column of the hall. We've never quite done it like that, both of us will do it instead," Astrid says once she's stopped laughing. "So there'll be a bow for you and an axe for me. Shoot straight, okay, the point is that the deeper the marks the longer the marriage is supposed to last. Other than that, I don't think so, feasting, drinking, and general entertainment."

"And during this general entertainment how many people is my wife going to be sending to the healer?"

"I make no promises."

They expect Stoick and Fergus to arrive next but Merida would never have imagined Elinor close at their heels, hiking up her long skirts and laughing along with her husband. She shoots her daughter a pleased look and gets a laugh. Merida scans the crowd as the last few stragglers arrive and comes up five short.

"Wait where's-"

"Waiting for the signal," Astrid laughs as she bounds up onto higher ground, cups both hands before her face, and howls into the sky. Merida laughs as it echoes back to them and a whole heard of Deadly Nadders fly towards them in perfect formation, led by a very familiar blue dragon. They're followed by Snotlout and his Nightmares, a mass of Gronkles, and the twins trailing a long line of green smoke.

And with a high pitched whistle and a cheer from the crowd it catches fire, bright blue Night Fury fire. Hiccup and Toothless land heavily in front of the crowd moments after the others touch down and he throws an arm over his sister's shoulder.

"I love your hair."

"Love the black eye." And he ducks just in time amid laughter from both Merida and Toothless. He pushes the large doors open and the

smell from inside the feasting hall is almost enough to make her dizzy and she takes Astrid's arm to lead her inside. Her Viking hoists the axe with a practiced ease that Merida's never quite gotten the hang of but the bow, bows are her thing, even the ones that are taller than her. The arrow and the blade crash into the support column at the exact same time.

For tonight they get the seats of honour at Stoick's place at the high table. Merida gets jostled in between Astrid and Hiccup with her parents on his other side and Stoick taking a seat on Astrid's left. Gunnar the stern head cook stalks down the tables and the large carving knife in his hand is enough of a threat to stop anyone from eating before the feast begins.

"Well, now that we're all here, it would be lovely if someone would serve the mead," Stoick says in such an offhand way that Merida expects a stuttering squire to come in with a pitcher, stammering apologies for his lateness. But it's Astrid who sighs, stands, and stalks over to the barrels. The Scot starts at the reaction from those assembled, a sharp gasp and a few barks of laughter before a cold look from the blonde quiets them.

"We're not laughing at you Astrid," Ruffnut manages from her seat a few spaces down from Stoick but the sharp twist to her lips betrays how difficult that battle is. Merida suspects that she's got quite a grip on her brother's knee under the table to stop him from saying anything.

"I think I'm missing something," Elinor says softly, turning to Hiccup as Astrid fills the tankard in front of her. "Thank you, lass."

"Well, the race from before, it's a really old tradition back from before the Red Death ate all the horses, and whoever loses has to serve the drinks at the feast," Hiccup explains and then, in a much louder and carrying voice, continues. "And just for the record, I am laughing. You cheated and she still beat you. _Dragi_, " he snipes and it's in a playful enough tone that Merida knows it's in jest and it gets a laugh from Stoick as Astrid wrinkles her nose at the word.

"Seems my children have decided to start the insult games early. Not entirely surprising," Stoick says with a smile to Merida.

"_Burlufotr_," Astrid sniffs and Hiccup pouts as she passes him by without filling his drink.

"Oi! If I said that you'd be all 'you're going there, really' but suddenly it's okay if you say it?" Snotlout exclaims and he gets hit from both Fishlegs and Ruffnut on either side of him.

"That's because she's not you."

"What's that mean?" Merida asks, she's tried to grasp the older variation of Norse, she's much better at the more common tongue.

"She made a comment about my foot," and he doesn't sound upset, just like she hadn't gotten mad at him. "Or rather, how unbalanced I still

am on said foot."

"That's not very nice," Merida scolds but she's laughing too hard to put force behind it.

"No, this isn't very nice," and that's the only warning she gets before he turns away from her to face Astrid across the room.
"_Hrafnasueltir_."

The entire hall goes silent, everyone torn between gaping at him and staring at her, even Mildew who'd gotten a considerable amount of mead slopped down the front of him when she'd jerked up to glare at Hiccup. Merida's seriously contemplating how quickly she could get between them and stop a confrontation as Astrid comes to a stop behind him, laying one hand on his shoulder while the other's still clutching the serving jug. He leans back to look up at her and looks so smug it'll be a surprise if she doesn't punch him.

"What are you going to do to me?" Astrid just smiles, lets him go, takes one step backwards and-

Upends the pitcher over his head.

It's deep and still mostly full so there's no way for him to avoid being drenched. Merida's not quite sure if she should laugh or not as she slides over on the bench to avoid getting splashed herself. Astrid curls a hand around her brother's wet shoulder, Merida sees him wince at the pressure, and gives him a nasty smile over his shoulder. "Libations," she hisses as she slams the pitcher into his chest. "To Jack."

And maybe, Merida thinks, just maybe she is becoming one of them because over the stunned silence and few brave sniggers she thinks she can hear the faint notes of another boy's hysterical laughter.

"Well played," Hiccup coughs as Astrid slides back into her seat on Merida's other side. General conversation starts up again as everyone tucks into the feast and Merida takes a moment to lay her head on Astrid's shoulder.

"Now was that the mature thing to do?"

"No," Stoick answers instead, moments before taking his first bite of chicken. "Because she forfeited the competition the minute she resorted to physical violence. Though, come to think of it, that's usually how your insult contests end up."

"Really? I'm so surprised," Merida adds dryly as the blonde just rolls her eyes. "You? Resorting to violence? Since when?"

"So I have a temper, you knew that." She holds a full drinking cup between them, the ornately carved one that had been sitting between their plates. "It's tradition, that we drink together. We're not officially married until we do." Her voice is soft and there's a pink tinge to her cheeks that she can't yet blame on the mead. Her arm is steady as Merida takes her first drink of the night and the mead's far sweeter than the ale she's used to from home. She grins as Astrid hands the cup over and she's just brought it to Astrid's lips when she's jostled from behind. Ice blue eyes shift from looking at

Merida's to some point of her shoulder, where she can only imagine Hiccup's smug expression, but she's distracted looking at Astrid's throat as she swallows what she's managed to drink and then her hand as it wipes the mead from her chin.

In the end, neither of them get at Hiccup. Stoick looms above them and plucks his son from the bench, growling about breaking tradition and ruining the wedding, dropping him between the twins. Merida laughs and leans forward to kiss Astrid and kisses her until her lips curl back into a smile. Her lips graze over Astrid's cheek, over the scars of long healed wounds, and winds her arms back around her wife's neck so she can whisper in her ear. "So, after we eat, how long do we have to stick around? When can we slip away?"

There's no missing her intent and Astrid only backs off far enough to catch Merida's lips again. "Well we're going to be the centre of attention once everyone's done with their food. Going now would probably be our bet if we don't want to cause a scene."

"And they'll make a scene, won't they."

"Between Hiccup and Ruffnut a scene will be made, whether it's now or later in the week. When would you rather face it?" They're whispering, foreheads close together, trying not to be over heard. "There's going to be feasting all week, we're not going to be missing anything if we sneak out now."

"We could always catch something later." Just over Astrid's shoulder Merida catches Snotlout's eye across the room. He gives her a warm, knowing smile, she can't quite remember when he'd gotten so mature but it had been a welcome change, and before she can really figure out what he's about to do he's leaping to his feet, pulling his cousin up with him, and challenging Hiccup to a sparring match in the middle of the hall.

And in the resulting chaos if anyone sees them run from the hall no one tries to stop them.

* * *

><p>It's at the final feast that Astrid quietly pulls Merida from the mead hall and down the path towards the forest.<p>

"Where are we going? I was just about to challenge Snotlout at knife throwing, I've been practicing and athletics are the only thing he's still a blowhard about. I want to take him down a peg or ten."

"While I agree and am looking forward to seeing it, there will always be more chances to defeat Snotlout. I want to give you your wedding present."

"What? I thought that was the dagger? Which is lovely by the way," her voice is full of teasing sarcasm, something Astrid's good at picking up, because it had been a lovely gift if a poorly made one.

"Oh shut it you, I did my best. Hiccup tried to teach me but I'm never going to be a blacksmith. That's his job. Mine's hacking things to bits."

"It's got a wonderfully sharp edge."

"Yeah, that I'm good at." And her axe gleams in the moonlight as if to prove her point. "There's just one last thing, now that you're officially one of us." That takes a moment to sink in and Merida's still not quite sure what she means until they slide through the opening to the hidden cove. The cove where Stormfly is waiting patiently.

Stormfly and a Monstrous Nightmare.

The new dragon is slightly smaller than the others she's seen, with purple and yellow scales and bright gold eyes. One of them, Astrid had said. Married to the chief's daughter. A Viking. At Astrid's lead she places her hand on the dragon's snout, feeling the warmth from under the scales. One of them.

It still takes her a moment to realise that this dragon is for her.

"His name's Tempest. He's from Outcast Island, we met a few years ago. You seemed to like Hookfang so I thought the two of you might get along as well."

"He's beautiful. And I am rather fond of the whole lighting themselves on fire thing." Tempest coos into the quiet night as Merida gently scratches under his chin. She'd been listening in dragon training classes after all. "Is he really for me?"

"How else are you going to fly with us? Think you can manage on your own the first time?"

"I ride Angus all by me myself," Merida says quickly, moving beside Tempest's neck and running a hand over one of his spikes. He's calmer than Hookfang, giving her the impression that he's older than Snotlout's dragon. Or maybe it was because Astrid had been the one to train him. She hops up onto his back, between two of the large neck spikes, and it feels like a more secure spot than she had expected.

"Well he's a bit more of a dragon than Angus is."

"How different can he be? Besides, it's not like it's my first time flying." She's not going to be dissuaded and Tempest turns to Astrid, giving her a reassuring lick up the side of her face. Stormfly nudges her in the back with her nose and clicks at her until she gets onto her own saddle. "See, they agree with me."

"Alright, see if you can keep up." Stormfly takes off, clearing the trees in a moment, howling into the sky. Tempest looks back, one gold eye meeting hers, and she takes a firmer grip on the spine in her hands. Flying with a Nightmare, she learns quickly, is not like flying with a Nadder. He's larger, heavier, with broader wings. Each flap propels them much higher than a stroke of Stormfly's but he needs to do far more gliding to stay afloat. Like an eagle.

They chase Astrid and Stormfly across the forest and then out over the coast. It's sunset and the wind whips her hair. The two dragons know each other well, know how to fly together, and Merida's able to

reach out and touch Astrid's arm.

End
file.